

Experiences of Japanese exchange students in a Cebuano university

Aileen C. Costas¹, and Jedidiah K. Singco²

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in the context of an intercultural exchange project of the University of the Visayas and Jissen Women's University in Japan, primarily designed to enhance Japanese students' English language skills. At the same time, the program aims to expose the Japanese and Filipino students to each other's culture. This qualitative study aimed to explore the Japanese informants' initial expectations of the program and their beliefs of Cebuano culture, as well as their actual experiences during their stay. Data used in the study were collected with the researcher as the main instrument. Students' written essays and answers to interviews were used as the primary data in order to explore and delve deeper into the informants' intercultural experiences. Several themes emerged, manifesting that the participants' goals and expectation initially leaned towards a purely educational perspective in which they wanted to enhance their English skills. However, most of their significant experiences were centered on having developed their confidence and connecting with the local students.

Keywords: intercultural exchange project, english enhancement course, global education

I. INTRODUCTION

The world today is becoming more connected due to increased interaction between people from all corners of the globe who share different cultures and languages. The rise of globalization has made the goal of intercultural unity even more significant than ever. Because of increasing interdependence between countries and cultures, there is a need to equip the modern workforce with better knowledge and skills, along with cohesion and empathy in order to bridge the gap that exists due to cultural differences (Deardorff, 2006; Hansen, 2010; Mansilla & Jackson 2011).

In line with this, tertiary education institutions are also aiming to train their students to think differently and work better in this modern world (ATC21S, 2011). Because of the increasing connectedness across the globe, the modern aspiring workforce is now required more than ever to be invested in international issues and crises, and to play a part in their local community, national culture, as well as the international scene (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). Being sensitive to different cultures has now become a desired competency, because it is an advantage in the development of a

global mind. These changes in the international arena have pushed higher education institutions and global policy makers to place a higher importance in global education. The Council of Europe (2004) for instance has asserted that global education expands student's minds to the crises that the world is collectively facing these days, and instill them with a drive for justice, fairness, and equal rights for all.

As noble this goal is however, some scholars also question the definition of "global education". McLean (2011) pointed out that the definition is still confusing, or complex, and lacks a connection to everyday life. Lucas (2010) likewise asserts that educators all over the world should come up with a unified understanding of what global education means, and how it can be integrated into school curriculum. If stakeholders continue to have different interpretations of this concept, it may also lead to different methods of implementation in a real-world setting. A plausible method to start this goal would be to identify exactly what competencies global education aims to cultivate. Information can be gleaned from several sources. Goodwin (2010) mentioned different key factors that

1. ORCID Number: 2-8092-0039, Aileen C. Costas, Department of Communication, Languages & Literature, College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Visayas, Cor. Colon and D. Jakosalem St., Cebu City, 6000, Philippines (e-mail: aileenuv@gmail.com).

2. ORCID Number: 2-4767-9343, Jedidiah K. Singco, Behavioral Sciences Department, College of Arts & Sciences, University of the Visayas, Cor. Colon and D. Jakosalem St., Cebu City, 6000, Philippines (e-mail: jedisingco.comm1@gmail.com).

globally-knowledgeable educators must have which is a completely different criterion from social knowledge, and lastly pedagogical knowledge.

Mansilla and Jackson (2011) on the other hand presented their definition of global education as “the capacity and disposition to understand and act on issues of global significance”. There are four focal skills that comprise global education: “investigating the world, recognizing perspectives, communicating ideas, and taking action”. Linell (2009) likewise adds that a global mind is not merely composed of an individual’s KSAs (knowledge, skills, and attitudes), but is mediated through the influence of others, of symbols, and technology. In essence, it encompasses the entirety of a person including one’s beliefs, identities, and relationships with other people (Kim, 2001).

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study is to explore the experiences of the Japanese students in terms of their expectations of culture especially communication in an intercultural environment, their actual experiences, and how the latter potentially reshaped their beliefs and mindset. The research questions are as follows: (a) What were the respondents’ expectations before studying in Cebu; (b) What were their significant experiences during their studies in Cebu; and (c) How has their stay changed their mind set or influenced their life?

This English enhancement and intercultural endeavor aims to strengthen the intercultural skills for the participants of Chikushi Jogakuen University from Japan and the University of the Visayas. The major activities for this five-month intercultural project are to (a) enhance the English communication skills of the participants; (b) provide avenues for the participants to interact with local students; (c) develop the skill in listening and speaking; (d) expose them to different oral drills for more practice; and (e) familiarize/immerse the participants into the Filipino culture in general and the Cebuano culture in particular. In this intercultural program, the participants were enrolled at the University of the Visayas taking courses in (a) Speech and Oral Communication; (b) Art Appreciation, as well as (c) Theatre Arts.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a descriptive qualitative design using the written accounts of Japanese exchange students. As stated by Polit & Beck (2012), researchers who choose not to follow specific disciplinary or methodological roots in qualitative research can opt for a content analysis of qualitative data, or “an analysis of themes and patterns that emerge in the narrative content (p. 505)”. The researchers opted for a descriptive qualitative design in order to delve deeper into the informants’ experiences during their stay.

During the intercultural exchange program, four Japanese students from Chikushi Jogakuen University in total were sent to the University of the Visayas in the 2nd semester of S.Y. 2016-2017, which is five months on average. All four students were included as informants of the study. All were females and taking up AB English for their bachelor’s degree. There were three second-year students and one third-year student who were enrolled in the university and took pregraduate courses taught in English.

In the tradition of qualitative research, the researchers are considered as the main instrument of the study, as they are responsible for the interpretation of the data obtained. The researchers obtained the written accounts of the informants regarding their expectations of their intercultural English enhancement course, their intercultural experience and their beliefs of cultures, multicultures, and communication before they came to Cebu. They were also asked to write about their significant experiences while they were studying and their emerging learning with others as well as any changes that they identified in their thinking and action. Lastly, they were asked to write about the most important thing that they learned during their stay.

Thematic analysis was conducted by analysing the informants’ written answers and coding them into themes for the study’s domain of inquiry. One of the researchers coded the data into themes and the other co-researcher reviewed the themes to ensure confirmability of the content.

Participants were provided with informed consent forms prior to the conduct of the study and data collection. They were assured of their anonymity upon participation, and that any data they disclosed would be kept completely confidential and used strictly only for research purposes.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Because there were three main research questions, thematic analysis was conducted for each question and information gleaned from the extracted themes was consolidated to produce an overall idea about their experiences and how it influenced them.

Informants’ Expectation. The first question asked the students to narrate what were their expectations of cultures, communication, and multicultures before they were able to study in a foreign university, specifically in Cebu. From the four students’ answers, a total of four major themes emerged.

The first major theme is about improving self-confidence and communication skills. Many of the informants stressed that they really would want their English communication skills improved, and that they also want to develop their self-confidence especially

when delivering speeches in front of an audience, as revealed in the statements below:

"I expect to improve my English communication skills especially in speaking and in writing." (F, 20)

"...I take this English enhancement Course [so] I will be able to speak English well and have confidence." (F, 19)

"I [think] I already have improved my listening skill, but I can't speak English fluently, so I expect to improve my speaking skills in this course." (F, 21)

"I expect to become [a] good English speaker. I'm shy so I want to improve myself." (F, 20)

Based from these answers, the informants believed that through the intercultural exchange program, they will be able to improve their English communication skills especially in speaking. Further interviews also revealed that the informants experienced a different teaching-learning style in Japan, wherein they focused more on developing the students' writing skills.

The next major theme was learning about foreign culture. Based on the students' written accounts, they really want to familiarize/immerse themselves into the Filipino culture in general and the Cebuano culture in particular. Aside from this, they also want to share to the local students their unique Japanese culture.

"We [want] to learn Filipino culture, and at the same time [share] our Japanese culture to them. We can teach them our Japanese language." (F, 19)

"I want to know about the Filipino culture, Cebuano culture in particular." (F, 20)

"I want to [know] more about the Filipino culture and the [Philippine history]." (F, 20)

As seen from the informants' answers, they were really interested in learning the Filipino culture through the intercultural exchange program. Further interviews also revealed that the informants already searched about the Filipino culture and the Cebuano culture in particular before coming to Cebu. In fact, when asked by one of the researchers, they said that they were already familiar of the Cebu's grandest festival—Sinulog. The essential insights reflected by these intercultural exchange students were related to the local people's dispositions. As seen from the data gathered by the

researchers, it was found out that most of the respondents were able to immerse themselves into the Filipino culture.

The third major theme was making new friends among the local university students. Many of the informants mentioned that they want to meet and gain new friends in the English enhancement and intercultural program, as revealed in the statements below:

"I expect to [establish] friendship with the Filipino students." (F, 20)

"I want [to have] a lot of Filipino friends." (F, 20)

"I want to build good relationship among the [Filipino students]." (F, 21)

Based from the informants' answers, most of their expectations revolve around improving communication skills and developing social relationships. The same pattern is found in other studies, who stress that social relationships are crucial in learning about new cultures and languages compared to simply teaching and learning by rote. As stated by Byram (1997), when it comes to developing insights about other cultures, the importance must be placed on the number of contacts that the intercultural participants create. The researchers found out that the program turned out to be more productive for intercultural experience compared to just aiming for making sense of the local people and their way of life.

Another theme was the informants' worries about their safety, lifestyle, and health. In this part, the participants were asked about their beliefs and the prejudices that they have before coming to Cebu. Some of the informants stressed that they are worried about their safety and of their health before coming to Cebu. However, other informants also shared:

"Before I came here in Cebu, I have images and prejudices that Philippines is really [a] dangerous country, so I have to take care of myself. We can't walk or go somewhere alone." (F, 19)

"Actually, I searched about Cebu before coming here, and the internet said that [we] should be careful because there are a lot of thieves. They steal wallets. So I was scared." (F, 20)

Perhaps this is merely about the participants' lack of familiarity of the host country's cultures. As mentioned by Dervin (2010), intercultural participants tend to be

influenced with the different perceptions and ideals of that particular host country. In other words, intercultural participants tend to put themselves in the shoes of the locals with varying degree of success. The different themes extracted showed how the informants' intercultural experiences allow them to develop a global mind.

Informants' Significant Experiences. For this specific research question, the informants were asked specifically about their experiences in learning the different courses. From the four students' answers, a total of two major themes emerged. The first major theme was about improving their communication skills, specifically in speaking, as revealed in the statements below:

"I learned a lot of things. I have an interesting class specially when we [presented] a [theatre show] and delivered speech in front of the people. I think it's helpful for my future because I can get confidence and [learn] how to speak in English." (F, 20)

"I think these courses are helpful for [my] future because speech and oral communication will help us to communicate with people and will [boost] confidence like making and [delivering] speeches many times." (F, 19)

"The three subjects are helpful for my future. I [learned] correct pronunciation, art appreciation, and how to act. There are many things that I [learned]." (F, 20)

Based from these answers, the informants believed that the subjects that they enrolled in this intercultural exchange program are really helpful for them. The second major theme is all about the informants' knowledge about creative and interesting activities. This is in line with the previous theme, wherein they were given opportunities to speak in front of many people and at the same time improved their self- confidence.

"I can say that [our] classes have a lot of interesting activities such as making and delivering speeches, DJ-ing presentation, and Acting Workshop." (F, 21)

"It's really fun [attending] classes because they speak English." (F, 20)

"Our classes are really fun because it's more creative than [our] classes in Japan." (F, 20)

Based from these answers, the informants believed that this intercultural exchange program has really helped them improve their English communication skills especially in speaking. Further interviews also revealed that the informants were very excited to come to their classes every meeting because they knew that they will be exploring a lot of interested activities in the class. Aside from having their communication skills developed, the informants shared that they were also able to boost their self-confidence through those creative activities designed by the teacher.

A similar research finding was also noted in the study of Brindley (2009) wherein the intercultural exchange students who studied abroad were able to strengthen their intercultural skills and made sense of their experiences with the local people as seen in their evident practices, and the teaching-learning style.

How the Program Changed their Mindset and their Lives. For this specific research question, the informants were asked specifically about changes they identified in their thinking and action, and about the most important thing they learned during their stay in Cebu. From the four students' answers, a total of two categories emerged.

The first category was about gaining confidence and not being afraid to make mistakes. Many of the informants emphasized that they were able to change their behaviour and thinking by boosting their self-confidence, as revealed in the statements below:

"I think the most important [thing] is to have confidence and [not being scared] to make a mistake." (F, 20)

"...In my opinion, I became more out-going than before and had a confidence, because of this environment. ...The most important thing I have learned during my stay here is challenging [myself to do] new things and do mistakes [and these] are connected to improve myself. It is about not only my English skills but also myself such as [my] character [and] ability." (F, 19)

"I think [that] my thinking and action are weird. I think deeply because I'm afraid to make a mistake and also I hesitate to make an action so I wanted to change my behaviour and thinking. I think, maybe I could change myself a little." (F, 20)

Based from these answers, the informants believe that because of the intercultural exchange program, they were able to improve aspects of their personality such as boosting their belief in themselves. Further

interviews also revealed that the informants experienced a different teaching-learning style in Japan, wherein they felt more pressured to deliver correct answers or to perform without mistakes during their English classes, unlike in the Philippines where they are encouraged to talk and practice their speaking even if they commit mistakes. Furthermore, the informants also revealed that in their English classes in Japan, teachers would focus more on listening and writing rather than speaking. The data showed how the Japanese intercultural participants were able to immerse themselves into the university's practices and culture. They reflected on their significant experiences while they were studying.

The next major theme was all about the informants improving their English communication skills. This is in line with the previous theme, wherein they were able to build their self-confidence mostly by being given opportunities to speak in front of many people.

"I learned about how to communicate with foreign people. Before we are going to be friends, we have to know others' culture and communicate [with] them actively." (F, 20)

"In the Philippines there is much time wherein we are asked to speak in front of [a] crowd [of] people. So I [got] used to making a speech in English." (F, 20)

"I made a speech many times, the opportunity to talk with people and speak in front of the audience increased, so I made many mistakes. However, I learned a lot of things in that mistake. I think that is also one of the causes why I changed." (F, 20)

As seen in the informants' answers, they were able to attest to the effectiveness of the English enhancement program. It would seem that teaching them English by exposing them to opportunities to speak in class makes the students feel that their foreign language skills are improving, compared to the usual teaching methods they were exposed prior to the intercultural exchange program. As the informants also stated, the exposure to a new culture also caused them to change their beliefs in themselves and how they think about the world. From these facts, communication and interaction with people of different cultural beliefs utilizing a variety of approaches in constructing and reconstructing global minds is deemed important. Communicating with the local people is also one of the useful and important ways in expressing their feelings and ideas for them to understand peoples' perspectives.

It was also noted that non-verbal communications played an important role in facilitating the participants' understanding of the host country's cultural beliefs. Furthermore, the participants immersion with the local people have helped them achieve their goals and have helped them to become more aware and tolerant of the locals cultural differences, which is the very essential part of a globally competitive individuals.

IV. CONCLUSION

As presented in the study, developing global minds is an intricate process which affects the intercultural exchange students' state or level of consciousness. From this perspective, global education takes a holistic approach. The learned and acquired intercultural skills with increasing diversity and depth is surely one of the potential actions of the intercultural exchange program in order to enhance global minds.

In this research, the holistic approach in exploring the exchange students' intercultural program was made. Involving the Japanese exchange students as research informants with their written accounts can be considered as the strength of this research study. It was also deemed important that open-mindedness was maintained in the research without looking at the participants' intercultural experiences based on their country of origin. Dervin (2010) also pointed out a similar issue in the context of research, stating that when research participants are segregated by their nationality, religion, or ethnicity, it may instead put a damper on the veracity of studies as it signals a message that highlights cultural disparities instead of doing away with them.

It is acknowledged, though, that this exploratory research study is limited to formulating hypothesis and thus, only delve into the participants' thematic insights from the bird's eye view, instead of coming up with a more complex and in depth research study. Hence, given the fact that the participants written accounts were formulated and conducted using English-their foreign language, can be considered as a limitation when providing and getting richer and more meaningful description of each participants.

It is further recommended that future researchers include additional interviews with the next group of intercultural exchange students and triangulation of the survey results. Succeeding studies may potentially delve deeper into the participants' other related areas of intercultural experience and use other methods like narrative inquiry as the major method in data gathering. Finally, it would be worthwhile to explore how the participants, upon returning to their respective country, enhance and develop their professional identities and intercultural knowledge as part of their life-long learning.

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AUTHORS

Aileen C. Costas is a faculty member of the University of the Visayas-College of Arts and Sciences. Her educational background includes Master of Arts in Education Major in English and Doctor of Education Major in Administration and Supervision from the University of the Visayas. She also earned her degree in Bachelor of Science in Education Major in English from the University of the Visayas- Main Campus.



Jedidiah K. Singco finished her undergraduate degree in Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in the University of the Philippines Cebu. She is currently taking up her masters in Social and Community Psychology in Silliman University, Dumaguete. She is also a psychology instructor and the research coordinator of the College of Arts and Sciences in the University of the Visayas Main Campus in Cebu City.

